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ABSTRACT

Guidelines for teachers of English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) who wish to undertake an ESOL materials development project are presented. Three areas that affect all such projects are discussed: (1) writing for a local or a wider audience, (2) writing as a team effort, and (3) writing as a decision-making process. In creating for a local audience, the writers are familiar with the needs of the learners, their ages, level of proficiency, degree of motivation, and cultural learning styles. At the same time, there is complete information about the instructional setting: class number, number of hours of instruction, and languages used by learners in and outside of the classroom. Parameters of the project should be defined in terms of emphasis on language skills, structural elements and processes, functions, and content. A team needs an organizer, an idea person, an experimenter, and an evaluator. In team writing, one person is totally responsible for conceptualization and design and for task assignment. The decision-making characteristics of materials writing is most apparent during the early stages of a project. Among the basic issues that should be settled early are: (1) Is the project needed? (2) Is the project focused on real needs of the intended audience? (3) Whose voice will speak from the pages (teacher or author)? (4) What will the student's responsibility be? Language content concerns are: selection and suitability of content, selection of context, grading, and the point of view expressed in terms of age, sex, social class, and nationality. The format, sequencing, practice modes, and evaluation of the materials also are important. (SW)

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LAUNCHING AN ESOL MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

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Choosing writing materials for second language instruction is a highly specialized craft which most practitioners learn by plunging in. Since the ample ESOL teaching/learning literature is strikingly deficient in providing guidelines to writers, this article is intended to fill that gap. In it, three areas which affect all materials construction projects are discussed: 1) writing for a local or a wider audience, 2) writing as a team effort, and 3) writing as a decision-making process. A checklist for use in the early phase covering basic assumptions, language content, and concrete shape of the materials is included.

Typically, ESOL practitioners are consumers of materials for classroom instruction, but on occasion they also find themselves in the role of producers of materials. The assignment is logical. Who can write materials for use by teachers and learners better than people who thoroughly know what happens in second language classrooms? But neither those who receive an assignment to write nor those who feel the creative urge to produce can find much guidance in the ample literature on language teaching/learning.

Chapters on materials in methodology textbooks have presented the topic from the teacher's point of view exclusively

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This article is based on a workshop presented by the author at the CATESOL State Conference in San Diego, April, 1980.

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by concentrating on the issues of evaluation and adaptation -- of materials that someone else has produced. Even current interest in syllabus construction has not gone beyond presenting the broad strokes of what to include. The forest is there, but it is difficult to see the trees: how to translate language skills, substance, functions or content into what will appear on printed pages.

Creating materials through which people can effectively learn new languages is a highly specialized craft, one that seems to be perfected only through immersion in the activity itself. Since the prospect of sink or swim can discourage potential talent, more attention needs to be paid to developing effective guidelines for materials preparers. In this article, emphasis is on the early, preparatory stage of developing materials.

All long-range materials construction efforts for ESOL are affected by three important considerations: 1) the audience for the materials is either a local or a wider one, 2) the work is likely to be accomplished through team effort, and 3) at every step, from initial conceptualization to final publication, there are countless decisions to be made. It is at the early stages, particularly, that the most crucial decisions are faced. In the following paragraphs each of these issues is discussed in turn.

Designing for a local or a wider audience

In creating for a local audience, the writers are familiar with the needs of the learners, their age, level of proficiency, degree of motivation, cultural learning styles, etc. At the same time, there is complete information about the instructional setting: class size, number of hours of instruction, place of the course in the curriculum, language(s) used by learners in and outside of the classroom and so on.

Such familiarization provides writers with a tremendous advantage, one which often supplies the original impetus for the project. However, knowing the audience well does not mean that writers should overlook, at an early stage, defining the parameters of the project in terms of emphasis on language skills, structural elements and processes, functions, and content -- or combinations of any or all.

Many writers begin by creating for a local audience, or at least by using their experience with a known group of learners and a known instructional setting and then projecting these needs and specifications onto a wider framework. As with the inevitable distortion that takes place in any enlarging activity, something personal seems to become lost in the process of translating localized needs onto a wide-focused screen. In fact, in most projects where the objective is to create for the widest

possible audience -- as in commercially sponsored undertakings -- writers must grapple with the dilemma that one size never does fit all. This lack of fit of so much of what is written for a widest possible audience is another factor which persuades many local institutions at least to think about producing their own materials, given the resources of time and talent.

Organizing the project

The team effort characteristic of materials writing projects brings several questions into focus: Who commissions the work? Who takes responsibility for organizing the work? Who controls quality? Who watches the clock -- and the budget? Who negotiates with editors/publishers when the writing is for a wider audience? Who deals with supervisors, school boards, or benefactors when the product is for a more local audience? Recognition of the complexity of the tasks which must be accomplished leads inevitably to writing as a team effort, or as a co-authored venture.

Another argument in favor of producing materials as a joint effort is that, in an effective team at least, members complement each other. A successful materials producing team is composed of personalities who have learned to compensate for individual weaknesses by using each other's strengths. In fact, a strong team needs divergent personality types so that there is ample opportunity for a continual flow of input and open feedback of ideas.

For example, a team needs an organizer, someone who tactfully lays out the tasks which need to be accomplished. The team needs an idea person, the one who has flair and imagination. At the same time, the team requires someone who is a hardworker, the diligent person who sticks to the job no matter what is the interference. Then, too, there is bound to be a worrier, a defeatist type who, by injecting an air of negativism into meetings, helps the others view the optimist's remarks in the cold light of reality.

A good team should have an experimenter, as well as an evaluator. Those who have worked with teams report that inevitably there is "a big talker" as well as a persuader, the one who can argue strongly for a particular decision. Along with all of the types listed, the team must also have a finalizer, the one who reminds the others to keep on the track so that the job will finally be completed.

One result of simulating a first meeting of a team for materials writing in workshop sessions has been to acquaint participants with the types of working styles that are apt to

emerge in a group. At the same time, everyone has an opportunity to ask themselves these questions: Am I a productive member of a writing group, balancing my conflicting tendencies towards cooperation and competitiveness? Do I work at my best when decision making is carried out in a situation where group dynamics is operating?

There is also team writing which follows an authoritarian format. One person, totally responsible for conceptualization and design, assigns the tasks. Since the work is highly structured, it is apt to be completed more punctually. However, as in any rote operation, there is an absence of creativeness. The products of this kind of team effort are usually easy to pick out because of the mechanical, production-line stamp on the pages. All units, all exercises are likely to be exactly the same as though a mold had been cast and those contributing simply filled it.

A checklist for the first meeting

The decision-making characteristic of materials writing is most apparent during the early stages of a project. To avoid unnecessary rewriting at later periods, many basic problems should be settled early. The following questions can serve as a checklist when the work is just beginning to take shape.

I. Basic Assumptions:

1. CONCEPTUALIZATION: Is the project really worth undertaking or are we re-inventing the wheel? Are there existing materials or texts that will serve the purpose?

2. DEFINITION: Are we trying to incorporate the universe or only a manageable part of it? Have we clearly focused on real needs and goals of our intended audience?

3. CONGRUENCE: Do the project's objectives interface with those of a known program or curriculum?

4. VOICE OF THE WRITERS: Whose voice will speak from the pages? The writers' (in the guise of the book) or the teacher's? If it is the writers' voice, how will we make clear when the voice speaks to the teacher, for the teacher, or when it speaks to learners? Do we need to address learners and teachers in separate texts?

5. TEACHERS: Who will retain the most control, the

teacher in the classroom or the materials writers through the pages of the text? Will the style of presentation be tight or loose? How much authority will the teacher be given? Will procedures be explicitly or loosely set out?

6. LEARNERS: How much responsibility for their own learning will students be given? Will they work individually, in pairs, in groups, or always as a whole class through frontal teaching? Are the modes of learning selected compatible with their culturally determined expectations about what materials should provide?

II. Language Content: Form/Function/Socio-Cultural Matrix:

1. SELECTION OF CONTENT: What language substance will we focus on? Will we integrate linguistic substance (phonology, lexis, syntax) and language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) or present them separately?

2. SELECTION OF CONTEXT: What language functions will we focus on? Will we integrate functions with situations? How will we select situations?

3. SUITABILITY OF CONTENT: How will we insure that language functions, situations and content are appropriate for the learners' educational and intellectual backgrounds? How will we utilize learners' previous knowledge of the real world?

4. GRADING OF LANGUAGE ELEMENTS: Should there be provisions for grading or control of structural, lexical, or functional elements? Should we indicate to the teacher/learners what structural elements are included in the materials? Should we indicate what structural elements or functional categories are included?

5. EXPLANATIONS OF LANGUAGE CONTENT: How will explanations about linguistic systems be presented? How will we help learners understand new relationships? new terms and themes? Should explanations be implicit or explicit? Should they be cast inductively or deductively?

6. DEGREE OF SOCIAL-CULTURAL NEUTRALISM OR PARTICULARISM: Will there be an identifiable point of view embedded in the language content in terms of age, sex, social class, nationality, educational status, lifestyle, etc.?

III. Concrete Shape of The Materials

1. SEQUENCING: In what order will the separate parts be presented? How will the order affect the presentation in the classroom? Should we consider random, spiral, cyclic, or modular ordering.

2. PERFORMANCE: What will teacher/learners do before the lesson (preparation)? What will they do during (practice) and after (reinforcement) the lesson? How will we provide users with occasions for additional practice and utilization of the elements of the lesson?

3. EXTERNAL FORMAT: How will we title the materials? Package them? Mount them? What graphic devices can we utilize to enhance their visual appeal?

4. INTERNAL FORMAT: What will constitute a lesson? A unit? A section? Will each contain the same elements? Will we rely on one exercise type or should we provide variety? What will exercises or practice segments look like?

5. CHANNEL: Through what channels will users carry out the tasks? Auditory, spoken, written, printed? Are the channels selected consistent with the register of language presented in the materials themselves?

6. EVALUATION: What measures will we include for assessing learners' mastery of the content? How will we field-test work in progress?

CONCLUSION

Resolving all of these questions may actually stretch over a longer period than just one meeting. But by defining the parameters of the project during the early stages, later problems can be anticipated or possibly avoided. In fact, through finding answers to these basic issues in the early meetings, members have an opportunity to learn more about each other's characteristics as team participants, affording any who find the process of group decision-making too restricting an opportunity to reconsider the commitment. At the same time, the head of the team is able to plan assignments based on actual working experience with each of the members.

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